

MelJol: An Indian Experiment

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Child participation implies total integration and involvement of children in their own development as individuals. They are active participants in assessment, reflection, planning, decision making, choosing between alternatives, consultation, and implementation of their decisions. MelJol views children's participation both as a process of change as well as an end in itself, which will ensure that children become responsible citizens.

MelJol believes that all children, irrespective of their age, caste, class, gender, ability, or culture, have the capacity and responsibility to improve their environment. They have opinions, which they should be allowed to express. They may also think of fantastic solutions to their problems, which they have a right to explore. In short, they should be treated with acceptance and respect.

MelJol endeavors to enable children to contribute responsibly to their environment, believing that, given the right direction, they can participate effectively in society. However, their potential remains underused, and many children never learn to think, reflect, find solutions, or judge on their own.

With its years of experience in the field, MelJol has realized that children are the best medium through which we can reach out to parents and, in turn, to society, for by reaching out to one child, we reach out to four adults, especially in schools. A message given in the schools reaches every household.

MelJol believes that citizenship building is a skill that can be acquired. When children are allowed to tackle issues concerning them, they learn how to function as responsible citizens and to address issues in a democratic manner. In the process, children gain the confidence to change themselves and their surroundings.

Children then become aware of societal processes as well as rights and responsibilities, and vigilant about rights violations. They also develop the capacity to think, question, and judge, and, accordingly, become prepared to change society.

Unfortunately, children do not participate at any level in India. They are told to obey their elders without question and not to express their opinions to them. They are told that they cannot think or act on their own. Atrocities against children are common.

MelJol has a series of interactive and child-friendly programs that emphasize learning through doing and that aim to empower children by creating awareness about children's rights and responsibilities. With the help of teachers, the teaching-learning process can become interactive and the programs integrated into the regular education system.

About MelJol

MelJol was initiated as a field action project of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in December 1991. Its main focus was to address issues related to children's regional, language, gender, class, caste, ethnicity, age, and ability prejudices. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is MelJol's framework. After over seven years of work in the field of child rights, MelJol

was registered under the Societies Registration Act (1860) on 23 June 1999. MelJol works in urban as well as rural areas and, besides Mumbai, has its branches in Thane, Pune, and Bangalore. The program reached 1,500 children in its first year. In academic year 1999-2000, it reached 95,000 children in 655 schools. By 2000, MelJol had reached 245,000 children.

Vision

MelJol seeks to develop children's citizenship skills by focusing on their rights and responsibilities, and providing them opportunities to contribute positively to their environment. It aims to promote child rights education in schools as well as in informal educational centers and institutions, and among out-of-school children.

Mission

MelJol's mission is to work toward an equitable social structure within a pluralistic society, i.e., one that is integrated, where different cultures coexist. By educating children and their significant others in child rights and responsibilities, MelJol addresses prejudices focusing on the following key concepts:

- *Equity*: Every human being should be recognized as uniquely different and as contributing positively to society. Thus, as equal members of society, children should have equal access to resources and opportunities for survival, protection, development, and participation.
- *Age*: People should be treated with respect regardless of their age.
- *Gender*: People should not be discriminated against because of their sex.
- *Ethnicity*: People's ethnicity should be respected rather than judged according to cultural assumptions.

- *Class*: People's socioeconomic class is not a cause for any prejudice.
- *Ability*: Attitudes toward the differently abled should be similar to those of any other person or group.

MelJol helps children imbibe positive values, and promotes, at the very least, tolerance, and, ideally, peaceful coexistence.

Its strategic thrust is to include child rights education in the school system by modifying the existing syllabus and providing new reference books.

Constituencies

Primary constituency: MelJol primarily works with school children, 10 to 15 years old, in urban, rural, and tribal areas. Recently, it started working with younger children. In urban areas, MelJol's intervention extends to private schools as well as schools run by government and local bodies. In rural areas, MelJol works with *zilla parishad*¹ and *ashram*² schools.

Secondary constituency: MelJol also works with significant adults in the child's environment, such as teachers, parents, school administrators, government functionaries, and so on, as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and State and local bodies.

Scope and services

MelJol has adopted a multi-pronged approach and a range of especially designed intervention strategies based on the needs of children in different settings. To meet its aims, it has three areas of intervention:

- programs with children;
- development of a national resource center; and
- advocacy for the inclusion of child rights education into the curriculum.

Programs

Work with children

The Twinning Program, MelJol's initial and core program, encourages children from private schools, government-run schools, schools for differently abled children, etc. to interact to address prejudices and understand "rights for all."

The Afalatoon³ program reaches children 10 to 15 years old through strategies and modules developed for children in different types of schools, through children's camps, and through the MelJol activity books. At this age, children are impressionable and developing their self-concept and values. The program addresses these aspects of the child's development.

The *government/local/rural school program* enhances pupils' self-esteem, making them confident to actively change their immediate environment and encouraging them to form school-level councils.

The program focuses on

- sensitizing the children to one another and to their environment,
- encouraging them to change their environment, and
- helping them to identify what they would like to change and how.

The *private school program* sensitizes children to issues related to the marginalized child. It is based on modules on street children, child labor, literacy, gender, slum pavement dwellers, disabled children, displacement, secularism, and the environment. The program helps children understand their rights and responsibilities, and violations of their rights, encouraging them to break stereotypes and prejudices. The module ends with the children adopting an action plan, which highlights responsibilities toward those whose rights are violated. The

child-friendly methodology uses sensitization games and activities such as role play, discussions, case study presentations, audio-visual inputs, fact finding, interactions, opinion polls, or interviews conducted by the children.

The Twinkle Stars program introduces values of equity, respect, and acceptance to children 6 to 9 years old through camps and MelJol activity books.

Intervention with schoolteachers

MelJol considers teachers as resource people and partners, and works with them through workshops and meetings to discuss strategies for guiding school children in undertaking their responsibilities and contributing meaningfully to their environment.

In MelJol Urban, the focus is largely on directly working with the target groups on child rights education through school- and community-based work, and on including child rights in the school curriculum. Fact sheets, handouts, manuals, etc. are used.

MelJol Rural's strategy takes child rights education to rural and tribal children through teachers and other village functionaries. It conducts workshops for teachers, community leaders, and government functionaries to

- make them aware of child rights,
- motivate them to be involved in child rights education, and
- strengthen the processes for child participation at the school and community levels.

This allows for large-scale child rights education. MelJol Rural also developed materials for both facilitators of child rights education and the children.

The program's strategy involves

- developing modules, called the MelJol Afalatoon Series Books,
- developing teacher's manuals that will ensure children's participation in the process of teaching and learning,

- conducting workshops for teachers and *kendra pramukh*,⁴
- conducting workshops for teachers with the help of trainers, and
- implementating modules developed by teachers in schools.

Module implementation involves the following:

- creating awareness among children about the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- relating it to village-level realities, issues, and problems;
- forming children's clubs, organizing children's fact-finding projects on village issues, discussing ways of dealing with the issues, and guiding children in planning and executing the solution;
- imparting values education through songs, slogans, and stories;
- organizing regular visits by volunteers, officials, and MelJol representatives to review implementation in the schools, and holding periodic teacher's meetings to share experiences and learn from each other;
- conducting workshops for significant others such as
 - *kendra pramukh*,
 - extension officers,
 - members of the village education committee,
 - village-level representatives of other government departments such as Health, Integrated Child Development Programme (ICDS),⁵ *gram sevak*,⁶ and Youth Group, and
 - parents;
- conducting programs for children such as
 - *balgram sabha*,⁷ where children present their issues and concerns at the village *panchayat*,⁸ and
 - *bal anand mela*,⁹ where children express their understanding of child rights and also enjoy meaningful entertainment.

Development of a national resource center

MelJol plans to be a national resource center for child rights education. It has produced much material, which has been modified with the help of teachers and children. It also regularly documents its processes. Its training kits will facilitate replication of MelJol elsewhere.

Development of material

Material, once created, is experimented with in MelJol programs, reviewed, modified, and then printed as manuals, books, handouts, etc. Children's feedback during the experimental phase forms an important component of the phase for review and modification.

Manuals for teachers provide information on child rights and give them guidelines for teaching children their rights and responsibilities. Separate manuals are created for different settings (urban, rural, private schools, government schools, etc.).

Books for children on child rights, which can be incorporated as part of the school curriculum and are interactive, use games, songs, puzzles, and other activities to make learning interesting. Learning is encouraged through child-friendly characters—Mel, Jol, Twinkle Star, Explorer, and Afalatoon, who are now also incorporated into MelJol's direct intervention activities with children. The books facilitate critical thinking and self-reflection. They are written in English and the vernacular languages.

Fact sheets and handouts for children are developed to reinforce messages about child rights and responsibilities. Facilitators use them to supplement sessions on child rights education.

Attitude scales to ascertain the impact of child rights education are being developed.

After standardization and validation, they will be made available to others for use.

Training and networking

MelJol trains school principals, teachers, NGO personnel, and other interested groups in child rights and in ways of communicating them to children. MelJol plans to further develop a network of organizations and individuals focusing on child rights.

Research

MelJol undertakes research on issues related to child rights in both urban and rural areas.

Documentation

A *database* for child rights will be created, facilitating the formation of a child rights network.

Advocacy for child rights education in schools

MelJol plans to initiate dialogue with the State Education Departments, District Primary Education Program, and State Center for Education Research and Training to include child rights into the educational curriculum, especially into subjects such as socially useful and productive work (including activities such as gardening, knitting, farming, electrical work), values education, social service (including activities such as teaching illiterates, reading for blind students, helping the aged), and civics.

MelJol is moving from directly working with children and consolidation of this strategy, to developing training packages for adults. MelJol will also lobby government and education departments to include child rights education in the regular school curriculum.

Impact

All the school-based programs were evaluated using scientifically developed attitude

scales. Children either wrote or said what they thought. The results of the evaluation indicate that the program has sensitized the children to the issues taken up. Overall, the children enjoyed the program. They found the sessions and games informative and meaningful and particularly enjoyed the interaction sessions with the other groups of children. It can be claimed that children have learned a lot about their environment and about themselves from these programs.

Teachers, children, kendra pramukh, and others responded well to the MelJol Afalatoon books. Children liked them and, during the monitoring sessions, we realized that they all knew the MelJol songs. The songs are the most effective means of imparting the program's message.

The books have many activity sheets. The activities involve getting information from village and community panchayat, doing house-to-house surveys on major issues, and getting opinions from *anganwadi*¹⁰ workers, doctors, etc. These help the children understand and internalize the program's message.

Child rights clubs have started forming in the villages. They are miniature movements for child rights. The children become responsible voters in club elections due to the election process they learn in school. In the periodic meetings, they learn to discuss their issues in a democratic way, start thinking about the possible solutions to problems, and take action. The whole process guides the children toward responsible citizenship.

The program has also helped create awareness of the rights of the child. It is a great achievement to have established among students, teachers, authorities, and villagers that children can change their surroundings.

The program has also promoted joyful learning strategies in the schools, which indirectly affect school attendance. Teachers and headmasters are now more enthusiastic, because of which teaching in general has improved.

Factors affecting impact

It has been seen from the review visits that the following factors generally affect program impact:

- teacher's motivation;
- leadership provided by officers and others;
- time gap between training of the teachers, getting books, and starting the program;
- inadequate number of books;
- implementation without training; and
- support from other village-level government functionaries and villagers.

Best Practices: A Few Examples

Dhanivali, Taluka¹¹ Murbad

Dhanivali is a village in Thane District, about 100 km from Mumbai. The majority of its residents are tribals. All the children go to the MelJol community-based school. MelJol uses its textbook for sixth and seventh standard, which contains the process of electing club officers (secretary, treasurer, and president). A chapter explains the democratic process of elections and the children's responsibility to vote. The election prescribed in the textbook is similar to that conducted in villages or cities. Thus, it includes multiple contestants, submission of manifesto by candidates (to explain what they will do if elected), campaigning, and secret voting.

This is the most popular program in schools as children enjoy the process and learn their most important civic responsibility. Students form MelJol clubs then approach other children in the villages (school dropouts, child laborers, etc.) to invite them to join. The clubs hold elections. In the club meetings, children discuss their issues, decide on the action they want to take, and also evaluate themselves. This is MelJol's first step toward establishing a children's movement for their rights in the villages.

The children elected the club officers, conducting the election process as described in the

book. They filed applications to contest election and campaigned. Some tried to bribe the voters but did not succeed. The children voted conscientiously.

The seventh-standard book also includes the story of an alcoholic father who abuses his children. It helps children understand the idea of right to protection. The club members, in consultation with their elected representatives, decided to campaign against drinking alcohol. They conducted *prabhat pheri*¹² and met with the villagers, explaining the harmful effects of alcohol. The *sarpanch*¹³ supported the children and tried to stop the distilling of alcohol. He gave loans to the producers to start some other small-scale business. The villagers also stopped drinking for 15 to 20 days. The children were unhappy that some of them started drinking alcohol again. Now they are thinking of different ways to stop alcoholism.

Umarai, Taluka Shahapur

Umarai is another village in Thane District, around 80 km from Mumbai. It also has a community-based school where children learn the same things as the children in Dhanivali. They are working to realize their right to health, a clean environment, and potable water.

They realized that the village women washed their utensils right next to the well, thereby contaminating the water. The children explained to them the problems that could arise due to this. In the beginning, the women refused to accept their mistakes and even insulted the children. The children persisted, however, and finally managed to persuade them to do their washing slightly farther away from the well.

Anti-Gutaka Campaign

Gutaka, a chewing tobacco, has become very popular among school children, who are addicted to it. The Maharashtra State government has banned the selling of gutaka in and

around schools, to no avail. Because children and parents are not aware that gutaka is harmful, and worse than smoking tobacco, the practice continues. MelJol and the children are continuously working on this issue in Mumbai, Thane, and Pune. In Mumbai, children together with MelJol have been conducting the Anti-Gutaka Campaign for the last three years. Initially, the harmful effects of gutaka are discussed in schools as part of children's right to health. Their clubs then decide to work on the issue. They hold meetings in their schools for their parents and in the communities. They make posters showing the harmful effects of gutaka and exhibit them in schools, communities, and all major railway stations in Mumbai. Children also role play, make slogans, and compose songs on the issue. Child representatives meet the city mayor, deputy mayor, municipal commissioner, and education officer to discuss the issue with them. They conduct processions, rallies, and prabhat pheri on the issue. Thanks to all these efforts, the government has taken steps to ensure that gutaka is not sold in or around the schools. The Anti-Gutaka Campaign continues in Mumbai and Thane on the MelJol clubs' initiative.

Varale, Taluka Wada

Children learned about their right to development and that they have to do something to realize it. They started a small savings group in the school, depositing their pocket money, which did not exceed one or two rupees. They could withdraw the money for picnics or to pay examination fees or buy textbooks, which their parents sometimes could not afford. Today, total savings is around 900 rupees. The children keep records and accounts of the money.

As a part of the MelJol module, they planted trees around the school. But the village cattle and goats damaged them. In order to protect the plants, the children, with the help of the teachers, fenced the school with thorny bushes.

Phalegaon, Taluka Kalyan

Since the school is on a hill, the children successfully demanded that the gram panchayat construct steps to reach it, showing that they understand their right to education.

The villagers used to litter the school premises. In order to realize their right to a clean environment, the children took the officials of the panchayat and education committee to the school to show them the dirty premises and appealed to them to do something about it. Littering has been reduced since then.

Uparale, Taluka Jawhar

The children of Uparale School, after understanding their rights to education and health, took up several issues. They felt that the school should have a compound. They then collected the wood and built a compound on their own, cleaned the well, and constructed a wall around it. They also encouraged the dropouts to come back to school.

Khupari, Taluka Wada

The seventh-standard book includes the story of an alcoholic, which is used to teach the right to protection. The story was particularly relevant to them, as a drunkard used to come to school everyday and disturb them. They decided to take up the issue of alcoholism. Together they strongly objected to that person's coming to school and made sure that he would not come to school in a drunken state. They also conducted a meeting of all villagers and described the ill effects of alcoholism.

Kunj, Taluka Jawhar

In this interior taluka, the children of Z.P. School Kunj collected their savings through their club and started a mini-bank from which they give loans to needy children. They also

organized various sports and elocution competitions, exercising their right to entertainment.

Shere, Taluka Shahapur

The teachers in this community, with the support and guidance of the kendra pramukh, have completed the MelJol syllabus. The children now understand their rights and responsibilities. During a club discussion, they realized that the school had paid the electricity meter charges almost a year ago but still had not got the meter fixed. In order to realize their right to education, the children marched to the Maharashtra State Electricity Board office in Vasind and gave a written complaint to the officer, who is now following up the issue.

Kishor, Taluka Murbad

The lesson on children's right to health in the seventh-standard book encouraged the children of Kishor School to campaign against gutaka. Together with their headmaster, they approached the two shopkeepers just outside their school and explained to them the ill effects of gutaka. They then requested the shopkeepers to stop selling gutaka. The shopkeepers agreed and kept their word. The children also encouraged the dropouts to come back to school and exercise their right to education. They also cleaned their temple and primary school.

Daighar, Thane Municipal Corporation School No. 91

A teacher encouraged the children to form a club. The children conducted elections to choose the chairperson, deputy chairperson, secretary, and treasurer. They were clear about the reason for forming the club, and the responsibilities of the officers. The members decided to take up the Anti-Gutaka Campaign and visited all the *pan* (betel leaf) shops and other small gutaka vendors and requested them not to sell gutaka to children, even if they were

buying it for their elders. They also made clear how gutaka affects the health. They are planning to campaign among their elders as well.

Dahagaon, Taluka Kalyan

The teachers completed the module successfully, then gave their students activity sheets and asked them to collect information. The topic for grade-7 students was school dropouts and nonenrolment. When the children collected related information on the topic, they realized the gravity of the problem, discussed the issue, and took up literacy as their first activity. They decided that "Each One, Teach One" would be their goal, to be accomplished during the upcoming summer vacation.

Vasundri, Taluka Kalyan

The grade-6 students collected information about the water problem. They wrote a song about their right to survival and how it is being violated because of the water shortage. They held prabhat pheri, raised slogans, and sang the song over and over again. The villagers at the Kalyan Panchayat Samiti Office followed up the problem, resulting in the construction of a bore well.

Jambhul, Taluka Kalyan

The teachers, after becoming aware of child rights, were happy to implement the module in their school, helping the children become aware of their rights and responsibilities. The children formed a club and planted trees and herbs as a first step to overcome the problems of their environment.

Future Thrust

In academic year 2000-2001, MelJol is moving from a phase of direct work with children to indirect intervention, by developing training packages for schoolteachers on child rights

education. It also plans to initiate a dialogue with the state education departments and government to include child rights into the educational curriculum in all the districts in Maharashtra.

It is exploring the possibility of reaching out to children in nonformal education settings by collaborating with NGOs.

Networking with NGOs to replicate the program internationally and nationwide is MelJol's greatest challenge.

Endnotes

1. The *zilla parishad* is a body of elected representatives at the district level. It manages all the government-run schools in rural areas.

2. *Asbram* schools are residential schools for tribal children. They provide food, clothing, books, notebooks, and medical facilities.

3. Afalatoon is a central character in MelJol books. Afalatoon means someone who thinks and acts differently, who is bold, innovative, eager to explore, and who takes the initiative in changing the world for the better. Mel, a boy, and Jol, a girl, are the characters in the books. The story is about how they became Afalatoons, encouraging children to become Afalatoons, too.

4. *Kendra pramukh* are teachers especially selected and appointed to review and monitor the academic progress of a cluster of villages (including around 20 schools). Usually with advanced training in education, they are generally young and enthusiastic, serving as a link between teachers and the authorities or MelJol.

5. This program is implemented by the government to ensure all-around development of preschool-age (up to 6-year-old) children.

6. *Gram sevak* are village-level government officials in charge of implementing all developmental and governmental programs in the villages.

7. *Bal gram sabha* is an innovative MelJol program meant to prepare children to become responsible citizens who can discuss issues in a democratic way in the local council. It can also be considered MelJol's step toward children's representation in Parliament, which is one of MelJol's dreams. Under this program, meetings similar to gram sabha are held. The only difference is that they are for village children. Children explain their issues in the meetings and the authorities and village council propose possible solutions. A gram sabha is a village-level meeting of all villagers with the elected village representatives. Here they discuss their issues and problems and collectively take decisions or find solutions. The meetings are held at least twice a year.

8. A *panchayat* is a village council of five elected representatives. Now, however, considering how village populations are increasing, the council sometimes has more than five members.

9. *Bal* means children, and *anand mela* means gathering for fun. Thus, bal anand mela is a children's gathering.

10. *Anganwadi* is a nursery school under the ICDS scheme. It is a kind of day-care-center-cum-nursery where regular health check-ups are conducted and nutritious food is provided to children and pregnant mothers.

11. A *taluka* is any district subdivided for administrative purposes into blocks.

12. A *prabhat pheri* is a long march, starting early in the morning. People raise slogans and sing songs. It was mainly used in the freedom struggle.

13. A *sarpanch* is the secretary of the village council (panchayat).